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The Use of Cell Phones in the Classroom: Redefining

The Definition of a Learning Environment

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CE5150- Inspiring Digital Media Fluency in the K-12 Classroom

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Without doubt, the definition of a literate classroom has changed dramatically in the past ten years. New technologies are arriving daily, greeting educators with a distinct message: the methods and materials we use to reach students must change in order to produce global thinkers and future members of the workforce. According to an article titled “Need and Importance of Information Technology in Education” on Wikieducator.org, there are two equally important reasons for integrating information technology in teaching. “Pupils must become familiar with the use of information technology, since all jobs in the society of the future will be dependent upon it, and information technology must be used in teaching in order to improve its quality and make it more effective”. (“Need and Importance”, 2009). Countless studies have been conducted on the use of technology leading to an improvement in learning in all types of students, including reluctant learners, special education, and modified curriculums.

Thus, the need for technology resources in our schools is not in question, but rather the topic of “how” to get equitable resources across all schools is a widely debated discussion. The expense of technology is staggering, specifically to most underfunded, over-budgeted schools. Numerous laptop donating programs from businesses, grants, various fundraising efforts among many other options are utilized to bridge the tech gap. But many educators and members of the general public are left asking a basic question: what about the technology resources that millions of children already own, are proficient with, and use already for schoolwork? That resource being the mobile smart phone. According to Schachter(2009), cell phones are becoming part of an “anytime, anywhere learning movement”

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that leaves other more expensive options such as laptops, netbooks, Ipads behind due to their inexpensive and ready- available nature. Mobile devices are viewed by many educators as a more affordable option for a multitude of classroom uses. Having cell in the class would enable students to have one-to-one computer access, a feat that at times seems nearly impossible within public school budgets. The authors of an article about this topic cite a study by the Joan Ganz Cooney Foundation Center that compared the use of mobile technology with the television program *Sesame Street*. The reports states that in a similar manner to the show, mobile device technologies are showing “enormous untapped educational potential for today’s generation.” (Schachter, 2009). With cell phones changing daily, many are well- equipped to perform tasks needed at school- calculations, web-browsing, sending and receiving e-mails, audio/visual videos, uploading pictures and information, etc. According to Rideout, Roberts, and Foeher (2010), cell phones have “morphed from a way to hold a conversation with someone into a way to consume more media,” (p.3). (Engel &Green, 2011).

According to Engle and Green (2011), although cellular telephones were initially business related, usage has exploded over the last decade in popular culture. Children and teens are fast becoming the main users of this technology advance. A survey performed by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation reported that 66% of 2,000 U.S. students surveyed reported owning a cell phone. This was a 27% increase from a similar 2004 survey. This increase in student cell phone use often brings up a problem in schools – should students be allowed to use them in the classroom for learning purposes?

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There are multiple arguments both for and against cell phone use in schools today, and both sides have valid arguments for their position. One particular argument involves student safety. Many parents want their students to have access to their cell phones throughout the day for check-in messages about afterschool plans as well as emergency contact if a school is in crisis. In these cases, phones are viewed as a vital communication link between families. (Danforth, 2003). The other side of this argument involves unsuitable phone use, such as texting inappropriate information, cheating on tests, negative and damaging comments about other students (sometimes even harassment and bullying). These examples explore non-academic uses and situations, which do present a problem in our schools. But what about the possibility of academic use?

Charles (2012) suggests ways for educators to integrate cell phone use into the classroom by incorporating so-called “mobile learning” (also known as m-learning) into pedagogical practices already in place. The author suggests that schools use mobile learning in structured and closely monitored student lessons to enhance 21st century learning. This would open up world-wide communication among students, enabling them to see past the classroom walls, and engage in global discussions. Cell phone use could also lend itself to countless applications and programs such as, geotagging, animototo, wiki spaces, sharing and editing documents. Schachter (2009) cites other projects used by educators involving mobile smart phones. One fifth grade teacher talked about having his students “draw solar system orbits on their devices” (p.32). Other applications include using the devices to animate changing

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number values, taking pictures for projects ideas, composing word documents that can easily be sent to one another through e-mail or pointing devices toward each other.

Engel and Green (2011) reported on a pre-calculus classroom’s implementation of a pilot program to use mobile devices in their daily teaching. According to the article, the pilot program was viewed favorably by most parents and teachers, and students were willing participants. They discuss three main ways cell phones were used. One was as an audience response system, which polls students on classroom topics and lessons, allowing for immediate feedback. This system also allows teachers to assess student understanding of a lesson, and re-teach misunderstood concepts. The second way was cell phones as a research tool, enabling learners to get instant information (a vital life skill). Because of the scarce internet and computer resources available in many schools, this is helpful for a continuous flow of research and use of new knowledge. The third way cell phones were used in the pilot program was as a tool for evidence collection of student learning. Students used their cell phones to take pictures of work and projects, utilized a class wiki to post assignments, and also took advantage of websites such as Flickr ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)) to post photos of completed work. The previous example is a fantastic view of possibilities in math classes. Other basic math applications that use cell phones include graphing, calculators that are easily accessible and simple cameras that can capture a student’s math work on a particular problem (eliminating paper!)

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Mathematics is of course only one subject area that could be enhanced by the use of mobile technology. The instant internet access can enhance outdated textbook information in all subject areas. In language arts students could access a variety of applications to explore writing and reading, blogging about books, participating in online literature circles. Science could be enhanced greatly by viewing live demonstrations, graphing new information, and tweeting about new subject materials.

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**Discussion**

The goal in introducing any new technology in the classroom is to enhance and improve learning for all students. This is an important point to remember when considering the pros and cons of mobile technology in the curriculum. Despite all the positive and exciting possibilities, valid concerns and fears remain for many teachers, administrators, and parents alike. In an online blog article titled “Cell Phone Use in Schools” (2010), the author lists many concerns of cell phone usage in class, such as the loss of a serious learning environment by use of cellular technology. The fear is that students will misuse their phones during class time, going on social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter. This could lead to major distractions during vital learning time. Another concern is that of student’s texting and talking on phones about non-academic subjects during class time, leading to less work being completed and more “goofing off”. Lastly, many critics of this technology integration subject worry about the number of students that may not have a personal cell phone to use in class, thus creating a gap between students with varying resources available to them. Although these are just a few simple examples of possible problems, the fact remains that integration of mobile phones as a learning tool is not a perfect solution to technology inclusion in class.

More research must be in this important subject area in order to viably introduce mobile phones as learning tools in schools. The ultimate goal in teaching is to enhance students learning experiences while teaching vital skills for their future. Perhaps opening up new doors

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for all learners in this particular manner would facilitate deeper learning and more meaningful curriculum connections, not to mention the mere excitement of using technology to discover new information.

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